

Freedom of the Press

The absolute monarchy of Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, as well as emergency laws that have been in place for nearly half a century, continue to restrict journalists and limit the diversity of media content in Brunei. Journalists face up to three years of imprisonment if found guilty of reporting “false and malicious” news under the Brunei Defamation Act. Content on blogs is considered publication “for the purpose of law and slander,” and can be used as evidence in court against a blogger even if defamatory statements are removed online. Passage of the 2005 Sedition Act worsened the state of press freedom in Brunei by expanding the list of punishable offenses to include criticism of the sultan, the royal family, and the national Malay Islamic Monarchy ideology, which promotes Islam as the state religion and the idea that monarchical rule is the only acceptable form of governance. Under the amended law, persons found in violation of these offenses, or any publishers, editors, or proprietors of a newspaper publishing items with seditious intent, face fines of up to BN\$5,000 (US\$4,000). There is no legislation establishing the right to access official information.

Under current press legislation, newspapers are required to apply for annual publishing permits, and foreign journalists must obtain government approval prior to working in the country. The government retains the authority to arbitrarily shut down any media outlet and bar distribution of foreign publications, with no possibility of appeal. An Internet Code of Practice, included in a 2001 press law, makes individuals as well as content and service providers liable for publishing anything that is “against the public interest or national harmony or which offends against good taste or decency.” It also requires all sites that carry content or discuss issues of a religious or political nature to register with the Broadcasting Authority. Violation of the code is punishable by up to two years of imprisonment and a BN\$20,000 fine.

While no incidents of attacks on or harassment of journalists were reported in 2013, authorities have previously warned the media to exercise caution when reporting on the sultanate. In June 2013, Abdul Rahman Omar issued a public apology for letters he wrote to the *Borneo Bulletin* challenging the punishment for adulterers in the Koran. In December 2013, the minister of religious affairs further advised the media to act as a safeguard against the defamation of Islam and to support the country’s decision to implement a more extensive version of Sharia (Islamic law) in 2014. Consequently, media are generally not able to convey a diversity of viewpoints and opinions, and criticism of the government is exceedingly rare.

The private press, including the country’s main English-language daily, the *Borneo Bulletin*, is mostly owned or controlled by the sultan’s family and practices self-censorship on political and religious issues to avoid confrontation with the government. In 2006, after receiving permission from the sultan, an independent media company run by a group of prominent businessmen launched a second English-language daily, the *Brunei Times*. The paper’s global focus is intended to help foster international investment, thus promoting government priorities. It also offers a wider range of international, finance, and opinion pieces, as well as online polls on government policies. A smaller Malay-language newspaper and several Chinese-language newspapers are also published in Brunei. Foreign newspapers are available but require government approval before distribution. The only local broadcast outlets, including the country’s one television station, are operated by the government-controlled Radio Television Brunei, and programming typically focuses on religion and government activities. Residents are able to receive broadcasts from several Malaysian stations, and international news is also available via satellite services.

In 2013, nearly 65 percent of the population accessed the internet. Internet access in Brunei is among the most expensive in the region, however, and internet users often issue complaints about slow speeds and unreliability. The primary internet service provider is state owned, giving the government a considerable amount of control over content. Since 2006, the government has also called on internet cafés to install firewalls to prevent users from viewing immoral content. The government continues to monitor the private e-mail and internet chat-room exchanges of citizens who are suspected of subversive behavior, and it is believed that fear of government retribution has reduced the number of chat-room visitors.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

75

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

28

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

25

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

22